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SUBJECT: LE DUAN: THE MOSTLY VARNISHED TRUTH

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) recently sponsored several events to commemorate the life of former CPV General Secretary (GS) Le Duan. State-press has characterized Duan as a

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"bright example of revolutionary virtues," but topics such as his sidelining of CPV luminaries Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap and his economic and foreign policies from 1975 to 1986 remain "sensitive" and off-limits, at least in the public realm. Our contacts indirectly criticized Duan in alluding to the economic hardships Vietnamese experienced during this time-frame. An important lesson Vietnam's foreign policy makers reportedly have drawn from Duan's stewardship of the country is that Vietnam should never get "too close" to any one country. End Summary.

Remembering a "Revolutionary"

¶2. (SBU) The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) recently sponsored several events to commemorate the life of former General Secretary (GS) Le Duan, who would have been 99 years old last April (or in his 100th year in Vietnamese tradition). Several State press outlets covered the Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) Department of Ideology and Culture-sponsored seminar on the late GS's life. Participants in this event included former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, HCMC Party Secretary Le Thanh Hai, Party officials from Ca Mau, Binh Duong,

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Tien Giang, Danang and Ba Ria-Vung Tau, war veterans and Duan's family members. Other CPV-organized events included the Ministry of Culture and Information-organized exhibition, "Life and Career of Former General Secretary Le Duan 1907-1986" in Hanoi and memorials in Duan's home province of Quang Tri.

¶3. (SBU) In covering these events, the State press heralded Duan's "bright example in revolutionary virtues," citing his formative years in French colonial jails and his role as a founding member of the Indochinese Communist Party and architect of the wars against the French and Americans. After ascending to the position of GS in 1960, Duan is believed to have sidelined Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap and other CPV leaders. However, the State press studiously avoids any mention of this topic.

1975 to 1986: Lessons Learned

¶4. (SBU) In covering the Duan commemorations, the press also alluded to the "complicated global situation" Vietnam faced from 1975 to 1986. The late GS's hard-line policies and the associated economic hardships remain "sensitive" topics in Vietnam, our contacts say. No one dares to publicly criticize his decisions during this time because some Party officials aligned with his way of thinking still work in, or have contact with, the Party or GVN, they add. A leading intellectual who was persecuted in the 1950's, but has been recently rehabilitated, told Poloff that the main reason why Vietnamese are reluctant to talk about Duan's time as GS from 1975 to 1986 is that, according to Vietnamese custom, it is "inappropriate" to speak negatively about someone who has passed away.

¶5. (SBU) The intellectual praised Duan's role as a revolutionary, citing his dedication and patriotism, but in an indirect criticism said it was a fact that many people suffered from 1975 to 1986 because of the stagnating economy. When the "renovation" policies were inaugurated at the Sixth Party Congress in 1986, it was like a "breath of fresh air" because the Party not only decided to open up the economy but intellectual life as well, he added.

¶6. (SBU) A regular contact with close ties in the media and military told Poloff that Duan's heavy pro-Soviet tilt in foreign policy -- after Vietnam's "liberation" in 1975 -- brought undo harm to the country. Duan went "too far" in aligning Vietnam with the Soviets, he said. For centuries, Vietnamese leaders have treaded carefully in their dealings with China, and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia -- which at the time was in China's camp -- brought war and more devastation and left Vietnam diplomatically isolated. Duan's "errors" are relevant today in that Vietnamese foreign policy makers will not get "too close" to any one country, this contact explained. The GVN's "friends with all," or omni-directional, foreign policy stems largely from what went wrong during the last decade of the Duan era, he added.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) Interestingly, an exhibition last year at a local museum on "Life Under the Subsidy Economy: 1975-1986" was unique for its

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unvarnished critique of GVN socio-economic policies prior to Doi Moi (reftel) and under Le Duan. But openness has its limits in Vietnam, and the GVN likely will not undertake, or allow, a thorough and balanced examination -- warts and all -- of Le Duan and policies any time soon. This appears to fit the Vietnamese public just fine. While many continue to laud Duan's role in the "revolution," they do not seem to want "complicated issues" from Doan's tenure to be put under a public microscope. End Comment.

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